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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1474
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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1910
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2429
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MUSLIM TOUR GUIDE AT GYPJAK MOSQUE
CHALLENGES NON-ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS BELIEF

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A visit to the Gypjak Mosque revealed that at least one of the Muslim religious students charged by the government to show visitors around such official government mosques may be showing signs of a more fervent and conservative religious belief than in the past. A testy religious discussion with a young tour guide suggests their education may be veering away from officially-supported views. END SUMMARY.

3. (U) PolOff took a visitor out to the Gypjak Mosque on April 18 to get a look at Central Asia's largest mosque and see Niyazov's well-guarded family mausoleum. As usual, a guide for the mosque materialized as we entered and initially reviewed the usual facts and statistics about the mosque's construction. The mosque still has quotes from the Ruhnama inscribed on the minarets outside and on the interior of the building around the dome. However, the Ruhnama is no longer displayed or studied at the mosque, according to the guide.

4. (SBU) We were surprised, then, when our teen-aged guide asked us in a gentle tone if we were Christians. When we responded in the affirmative, he surprised us with a flurry of well-considered questions about Christianity. Was Christianity a monotheistic faith? If so, how did we explain Christian faith in Jesus Christ, who was described as a son of God? When his questions were not sufficiently answered, he took a new tack.

5. (SBU) Muslims have the Qu'ran, and Christians have the bible, he stated. Why then, he asked, were there so many versions of the bible, and why were the versions so different from each other? (NOTE: He apparently believed that there was only one version of the Qu'ran. END NOTE.) After hearing the response that there were complicated reasons for this, he then asked why Muslims were always represented as terrorists in American films. EmbOff responded that people of many faiths, including millions of Muslims, live and work in the United States, and that such representations occurred

only in some movies.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Post has brought many visitors to this mosque, and there has always been an officially-sanctioned guide who would limit his commentary to describing the mosque's features and the numbers of guests it has hosted. Never before, however, has the guide sought to engage us in a substantive doctrinal discussion of Islam versus Christianity. It appeared that this young guide either had the opportunity to read some literature on the Internet or had been influenced by a Muslim cleric who may have less moderate/tolerant view of religion than is standard practice here. Either option would constitute a change regarding what young Muslim students might be learning, and where they are learning it. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND